

THE MARBLE GAME

GEORGE JAY O'LEARY

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

1996

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to gratefully acknowledge Milton Haynes and the late Ted Maggos for suggesting that I could make poetry my pursuit; my first teacher, Donna Masini, for guiding me in those years of particular uncertainty; Sidney Wade for patiently encouraging me to write into the unknown; and, especially, Suzanne Carlton for insisting that I find and express the heart.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	v
MIDWESTERN FOUNDATION MYTH.....	1
ONE MORNING IN THE ETERNAL CITY.....	2
DIMINISHING RETURNS.....	4
EARLY EVENING.....	5
SUMMONING THE BEASTS.....	6
UNDER FOOT.....	7
ARIA FOR THE INSOMNIAC.....	8
THE WET CELLS OF SPRING.....	9
THE NIGHT STEVEDORE.....	10
LAST WINTER IN DÜSSELDORF.....	11
TOMPKINS SQUARE AT DUSK.....	12
EXPOSURE TO THE ELEMENTS.....	13
PIAZZA NAVONA.....	14
TENEMENT NOTEBOOK.....	15
EMPIRE STATE BUILDING.....	16
LIFE-SIZE.....	17

TWO DOWNTOWN SYNAGOGUES.....	18
FLORIDA IMPROMPTU.....	19
THE BROOKLYN BOOK OF HOURS.....	20
CHESS PIE.....	21
DEAD OX FLATS.....	22
CLEARING OUT OF SEATTLE .....	23
ROOM ELEVEN .....	24
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	25

Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School  
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

THE MARBLE GAME

By

George Jay O'Leary

May 1996

Chair: Sidney Wade  
Major Department: English

These poems are concerned with the unsettling loss of certainty one feels when confronted with the distant and the unfamiliar, and with the individual's attempts to construct provisional, imaginative meanings under the terms of that loss.

## MIDWESTERN FOUNDATION MYTH

A cunning oracle withholds the best.  
The tax on prophecy is not to tell  
the founder of a city how his sister  
became a cow, the very beast he wanted,  
in his ignorance, to sacrifice to the god  
who had raped her with bullish abandon.

The usual obstacles delayed her fate.  
A serpent devoured the founder's noisy men,  
so appeasing gods or laying out broad avenues  
had to wait. He sowed the serpent's teeth  
like kernels of corn. The newly germinated  
brothers ran each other through with spears.

Five were left. They skewered bull snakes  
in their root cellars; ripped open  
the prairies with plows of molded steel;  
razed silos and barns; routed the mainline  
and spurs. They even strung a telegraph wire  
so the coast could hear of their disasters.

Serpentine freight trains with slatted cars  
hauled thousands of head to the market town.  
They wound through the wooden labyrinth to feed  
the slaughterhouses already bulging with slabs,  
salted or on ice, since the first unblemished  
heifer wandered onto that Great Plain.

## ONE MORNING IN THE ETERNAL CITY

Almost aqueous the shade  
on the Via Veneto. I waste  
some time before examining  
more bees woven into the corners  
of the Barberini tapestries.  
Outside the Ministry of Craft  
workers agitate  
their placards with the vigor  
of a hundred washing machines.  
I tell myself these men  
are the lost-wax casters gathered  
to protest a shortfall of bees,  
and then I envy them a little.

In viscous English a fellow  
bystander asks me what is happening.  
He says he is a journalist from Chicago.  
Says he lived there with a woman half his age.  
Says they suffered "problems of communication"  
when she found an even younger woman in their bed.  
Says she got a lawyer and left him  
half a million dollars poorer  
so he moved to Rome.  
Why not? he says.

And would I like to join him  
for an espresso?  
At the corner *tabacchi*,  
the owner makes it nice for him  
and they remember days in Alexandria.  
(What happened to Chicago?)  
And over coffee I could help him draft  
a letter of appeal  
to Dr. Carol Ludwig at the U.S. embassy  
who has denied his press credentials  
a third time.

I explain how the ruinous sun,  
the death mask of Keats, the *carabinieri*,  
and a Russian-born guide in the Vatican  
are conspiring to limit my time  
and I spin away from him  
to fly off with the swallows  
screeching toward the Villa Borghese.



## DIMINISHING RETURNS

### I

A new moon (no moon at all)  
only appears to mend the cobblestones;  
carriage rims clank, iron-bound as ever,  
across the empty square. Let's face it.  
I need something in my way to rub against.

### II

For months I drew the phases  
on my bedroom window with a bar of soap.  
Night by night the edge grew sharper  
as I honed it on the glass.

### III

The idle carriage horse, sack-brown,  
nuzzles a utility pole.  
The moon has horns pointing west.

### IV

Tap water. Fills the white enamel  
basin with a masterful glissando.

EARLY EVENING

*for Suzanne Carlton*

Laughter and ice cubes rattle  
with almost equal uncertainty.  
Finger sandwiches, crudités  
fan out on bone-white platters.

She asks: It's not too 'country,' is it?  
and points to the black-eyed porch.  
Its fresh red door admits us;  
our heels report on the scuffed pine floor.

As one might thump the side of a barrel  
or press a conch shell to his ear,  
we inventory what is around us  
and estimate what is still hidden.

And voices linger over the lawn  
like the smoke of banished cigars.  
Neither of us enjoys these affairs.  
We'll be married here in the spring.

## SUMMONING THE BEASTS

*Wheeled miniatures from  
the Mesopotamian city of Susa,  
c. 1500-1000 B.C.*

The lion reclines; the hedgehog  
hunches his crosshatched spine.

Pale limestone figurines  
rest on dark undercarriages:

slabs of bitumen coalesced  
from asphalt, chalk and quartz;

rims chiseled sharp as blades;  
nails for axles; rusted blunt hubs.

A typewritten legend explains  
how the experts disagree:

either talismans or toys.  
Flinging dirt, the hedgehog scurries.

across the oval of hot dust.  
The lion chases, bewildered by jeers,

flattened by speed.  
Remonstrant. Now rampant.

## UNDER FOOT

*Cologne, Germany*

Standing with my back to the towering doors outside St. Severin's basilica, I notice the paving stones are laid in a circular maze whose outer edge is solid black. I enter, trying to act nonchalant, and find the path as regular and boring as a drain. The interior is choked in black as well. *Ein Geheimnis*, I mutter, and hear at the center of the word for secret the one for home. Perhaps the dark stones were the passageway, the light the barrier. Before I can test this new hypothesis, a nun hurries by and, without glancing at me, disappears into the nave. I would not have asked her to explain the labyrinth anyway. Years ago, Thelonious Monk demonstrated the central comfort of static motion. In the middle of a busy station, he slowly began to spin in place without distracting the other travelers hurrying past to catch a bus. Alone in the maze, I turn and turn in the gray slurry of a morning on the Rhine.

ARIA FOR THE INSOMNIAC

*in memoriam Glenn Gould, 1932-1982*

North all night you drove  
Your Lincoln Continental,  
Reaching the tundra in time  
For its anesthetic noon.

Sunglasses surveyed the permafrost  
In homage to subtraction.  
You thought only this extreme  
North could rectify your music,

That whiteness so bleak  
Would demand an instrument  
Of most elegant action  
To articulate. You probed the keys.

Bach composed the aria  
And thirty variations so that Goldberg,  
On his harpsichord, might soothe  
The insomniac Count Keyserling.

The grateful nobleman  
Filled a goblet with gold coins  
For Bach, who in turn loaned you  
The nightly courage of obsession.

## THE WET CELLS OF SPRING

That May the rain fell so long and hard on his roof of terra cotta tiles, the patio of cracked slate, the rusting chairs, that it lost its sonority. He clipped every mention of rain from the daily *Post-Intelligencer* with his old schoolboy scissors, blunt-nosed but still surprisingly sharp. At night he composed a letter to the editor with the cuttings arranged according to size and weight and glued down with a wheat paste he had once believed to be edible. He read the cut-out rains aloud. It all took time. Downstairs, an electric bus stroked the whetstone avenue with balding tires; the pantograph sizzled and sparked its own small lightning. His work was finished; he wasn't going anywhere. White petals clustered on the terminals of his battery. He had always hated basic science.

## THE NIGHT STEVEDORE

This evening the estuary gives a boat  
So little trouble, its crew seems inferior  
Or half asleep. The tug pulls even with the dock,  
Then strains off from the interior.

A tug and barge will iron the water,  
Even as they crease it, even as the great  
And stubborn engines mastering the tide  
Are hidden. The tugboat does not hesitate

Once it finds the channel to Fresh Kills,  
Which, like any landfill, is problematic; it won't  
ever settle. Half a moon attends the burial  
Of salt-encrusted linens, best forgotten,

In heaps on the far side of the island.  
Night sends only this unsubtle barge.  
Cargo less sordid is too delicate for the hook  
The night stevedore swings to unload the stars.

## LAST WINTER IN DÜSSELDORF

Unlike some fantasies, yours disconcert.  
As I rehearse them on the outskirts  
of your failing, my fingers won't sustain  
legato, nor my breath inspire that pain.

I know enough to swab the ebony and head  
down to the Rhine. (Not as you, in robe and slippers, fled  
across the empty swanmarket.) I find the streetcar,  
enter by the exit, uncertain how far

my ignorance will take me. Now it ascends  
the bridge at the point where the river bends  
its mongrel knee (where you once offered to pay the toll  
with a linen handkerchief Clara had folded.)

Nine Fingers, why can't you recognize  
the angel's theme? It's one of yours. The moat lies  
in a coma under lindens you ignore.  
to dream of Leipzig's Kaffeebaum, old scores.

What silenced your right hand? Mercury? The sling?  
Was her father's admiration worth the sting  
which you yourself inflicted? Carnival is weeks away,  
but already deep in Altbier, you are lost for the day.

Florestan, Eusebius, how could you guess  
the interwoven grief you would possess?  
Only the idle wish they had a choice  
of fingerprints, of speaking in another's voice...

Your mother had no alternative. The tatters  
of the Grande Armée returned and gave her  
typhoid. You were shuffled to the stolid  
Bürgermeister's wife. Alone beside the Mulde

you organized a brotherhood of characters  
so rarefied their music passed unheard  
through Zwickau's doors. Yet what is human  
decomposes in the pile of limbs, Herr Schumann.



## TOMPKINS SQUARE AT DUSK

*Lower East Side,  
New York, May 1991*

Against the headlit traffic on Avenue A  
men whose white helmets are stoneproof but pitted  
hunt down the kids who usually beg  
spare change for falafel in Alphabet City.

Their coat of arms displays an upside-down  
martini glass. Their necks are dirty and lean.  
Safety-blue sawhorses fence the square  
whose lawn and band shell are quarantined.

Swimming in a private pool, the Parks Commissioner  
privately says the square will not reopen  
until the infestation is removed. A kid  
heaves an empty pint of vodka at the visored men,

who pummel squatters and the shipping clerk  
coming home with his beef lo mein and grapes.  
*To protect and serve.* The patrolmen mask  
their badges with black electrical tape.

## EXPOSURE TO THE ELEMENTS

Quickening its silvery drowse, I shook the vial  
my father had brought me from the mine.

All day he and other men gouged the flinty  
blood from palomino hills and melted

raw cinnabar to mercury so mothers might  
gauge their children's fevers.

I saw my first slaughter in those hills.  
My friend and I caught his father

as he fired a round of lead behind the ear  
of the waiting cow and sawed a knife across her throat.

The midsummer dust wicked up her blood  
like motor oil drained in a vacant lot.

I caught the disappointment in her eye.  
She looked nothing like my mother.

## PIAZZA NAVONA

Without a single address committed to memory;  
Without the familiar denominations  
Of faith in coins and postage stamps;  
Without the least itinerary;  
Without a doubt, the novice is disoriented, free

To listen and nod as the fountain's water slicks its stone;  
To accept the pool for its shallow delight  
And its inarticulateness;  
To measure these against his own;  
To establish the dishonesty of weights and measures.

The stewards, unafraid, admit the day is out of hand,  
Opening tall, pointed windows to release  
The mass already in progress.  
The guitar, low and resonant,  
Steadies the chorus, also unafraid though quavering.

As the figures and inscriptions on monuments recede,  
As the faces on the sundials are worn smooth,  
The traveler learns how to command  
As little as he can.  
In the market he buys eggplant for its color alone.

## TENEMENT NOTEBOOK

Scarred mantel clock: a gift for leaving.  
Beveled mirror dug from the trash: its silver  
thinning; nimbus showing through. No sun.  
The fireplace cinder-blocked. The radiator  
bleeding rust. Orange poppies in a fluted vase.

*He came unshaven for dinner every Saturday.  
Millie, who should have been his mother-in-law,  
always made meatballs with a saccharine tomato sauce  
she called gravy. The opulence of his cheeks,  
the inorganic hardness of his eyes--the Times had captured  
these. Days he pretended to be crazy, strolling  
on the West Side in his dirty yellow bathrobe.  
It was working.  
He and Millie and her daughter Mitzi and their  
three little bastards ate meatballs with  
the door wide open so he could watch the hall.*

Lukewarm rain in the mirror. Her steady  
loss of memory. A doily tatted before the television.  
Kitchen drawer: spare key to the police lock;  
cellophane; green dice; left rubber glove; brass  
knuckles from the son-in-law; first rosary.

## EMPIRE STATE BUILDING

New in town, I don't yet know how  
to keep my distance. When I read its name  
beside the door, my head snaps back,  
a hand salutes to shield my eyes.  
No one can appreciate this monument  
by standing directly underneath.

New terminology I rent with my rooms:  
*railroad flat*. I bathe in the kitchen  
next to the Slattery oven. At night I study  
cloverleafs in the ceiling of pressed tin.  
My balcony, the rusty fire escape, affords  
a view of the Empire's torso if I lean.

It begins to follow me on walks:  
in Washington Square, Astor Place, Mulberry Street.  
Its colored floodlights, better than an almanac,  
mark my holidays. I learn its spire  
was meant to tether zeppelins. Queasy  
after the eighty-six stories, I buy a calendar.

If you want to see Manhattan, move  
across the river, under the L train's general  
anesthesia, to Williamsburg, where rubble  
in the foreground only heightens  
the distant monument, saffron tonight  
although the calendar is clear.

## LIFE-SIZE

*after Ted Berrigan*

The hassled loafers of Mercer Street  
Haven't any wool. Their new business  
Is plain effrontery, an art.  
To judge by the statue of him in the square,  
Garibaldi never was strong enough  
To draw that marble sword  
Across his chest. The fuller the bundle  
Of rage, the greater the risk  
Its leather bands may burst.  
We stumble on the cobblestones.  
The sculptor wears a knockoff  
Of Garibaldi's blouse  
And drives a red Ferrari. He traded in  
Life-size horses when the market was high.

## TWO DOWNTOWN SYNAGOGUES

### *Charles Street, West Village*

Cramped. Like a shoebox  
stood on end.  
For all but holy days  
its doors are chained.  
Then light from a dim chandelier  
rubs the shoulders of black suits,  
the suits of a diminished world.  
Around the corner,  
at an overpriced patisserie,  
the worshippers of sycamores  
and failing hearts  
exchange their seasonal vows.

### *Rivington Street, Lower East Side*

Two opposing triangles  
realize the six-point star  
in sooted limestone, faded glass.  
As the garment trade went South,  
so did many of the votaries.  
A sculptor bought the empty synagogue  
for its vaulted ceilings  
but immediately had to weld  
a blackthorn barricade  
as a resistant strain  
of junkies milled outside.  
All of the kosher delis closed.

## FLORIDA IMPROMPTU

The Atlantic is a good eighty miles away  
and so is the Gulf. We don't see  
either body as often as we could.  
We learn to live like this, watching  
two woodpeckers strike in the unmowed grass  
at the base of our senile oak.  
Each red topknot moves like a knife  
clutched in the hand of a child.  
Accidents happen on the calmest beach  
to those who ignore the sign. A wave,  
like the slip of a monstrous tongue,  
betrays the swimmer with a hiss.  
The birds don't fool us. I punch holes  
in a can of milk with a screwdriver.



## THE BROOKLYN BOOK OF HOURS

Rain maddens the crows  
visiting Greenwood--summit  
and cemetery.

"Gingkos do not mind  
eating smoke." Saul the grocer  
works on his English.

War memorial.  
Once it has risen, the bronze  
horse cannot come down.

Flatbush Avenue.  
The Corn Bank has closed for good.  
Sorry they missed you.

Red Hook scars: Reingold  
in stubby bottles, chop shops,  
.380 specials.

The radio screams  
in French. Gold teeth. Frankincense.  
Driver, are you sure?

Crows fly over the flood  
and light at Coney Island  
to strut on the sand.

Snow again. Late March.  
Salt crests on our elk-hide boots.  
Lightning. Muffled bells.

## CHESS PIE

*Helen Duprey Bullock,  
historian of colonial cooking,  
died in 1995, at 90.*

An open-hearth authority,  
Mrs Bullock once admitted  
the chess pie is not  
a handsome pie.

But when has history  
tasted better? asks her  
obituary in the *Times*.  
It includes the recipe.

## DEAD OX FLATS

No one had touched the bottomland  
along the Snake River until Samedá  
planted his gladioli. Bulbs

he shipped as far as Florida;  
the flowers he left for his wife  
to gather and sell to my grandfather

at 50 cents a dozen for funeral sprays.  
*The Latin root is gladius, for sword*  
grandfather recited every time

he drove us along the frontage road  
as rutted as his memory. A Buddhist  
high priest flew in from Japan to oversee

the wedding of Samedá's daughter. Grandfather  
arranged the flowers, drank too much sake  
and danced with everyone including Samedá,

in his black tuxedo and white carnation.  
*Flower of the flesh. Flower of the flesh.*  
The Snake stirred itself and swallowed

the sword lilies. Mr. and Mrs. Samedá  
left Dead Ox Flats and returned to Japan,  
to an elegance of temples, an absence of mud.

## CLEARING OUT OF SEATTLE

### I

Tuckwell flew into Mozart's third  
concerto on the horn of a morning  
glory pollinated with soot.

I practiced a lower criticism then,  
compiling myself in two discrepant rooms  
overlooking the drydock end of the lake.

At night, arc welders flashed along a hull  
that required the coldest blue burn.  
I supervised from a twin bed.

### II

Flight displays the assembly of clouds  
in exploded view--ultralight  
machinery lubed in a bath of sun.

Mt. Rainier, the higher we scale,  
looks all the more entrancing  
for its glacial immobility.

I sit by the double-thick window  
and stare as if for the final time,  
in lacquered disbelief.

## ROOM ELEVEN

*after Anna Akhmatova*

### I

Yes, I detested those brown, ankle-high shoes.  
The man in the store had lied; they did not  
improve my marble game. What could they correct  
with their boxy toes and chafing tongues?  
When the other boys teased me, I went off  
looking for puddles and broken glass.

### II

There was no simpler way, not with a mother  
mortally afraid of deformity

and drowning. I stood for an hour  
up to my neck in the shallow end

of the municipal pool, in the rain,  
waiting and shivering--the first lesson.

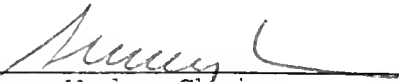
### III

Isn't it easier to tell in this remedial light?  
She simply wanted the best for me someday--  
there is nothing wrong with that. I wear canvas  
sneakers with holes in the bottoms and play  
solitaire in motels. I drink domestic wine  
and float on my back maybe once a year.

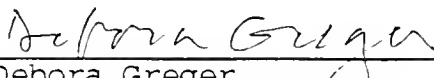
## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

George Jay O'Leary was born in the Snake River town of Weiser, Idaho in 1954. He was educated at the University of Idaho and Washington State University and has lived in eastern Washington, Seattle, Manhattan (Little Italy and Morningside Heights), and Brooklyn (Park Slope and Williamsburg).

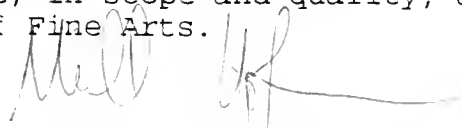
I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Sidney Wade, Chair  
Assistant Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Debora Greger  
Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Michael Hofmann  
Distinguished Lecturer, English

This thesis was presented to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

May, 1996

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean, Graduate School

LD  
1780  
199  
.045

